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Improving the Youth Sports Experience

By Steve Carpowich

Youth sports is hitting a growth spurt, with 44 million kids in the U.S. now playing in at least one organized activity, according to the National Council of Youth Sports.

Getting into the game can bring many benefits: improved fitness, better social skills and less downtime for potential trouble. But pressure to succeed at a young age has set the stage for physical overuse injuries, emotional stress and burnout. Even if well-intentioned, too much pressing can create problems.

These pitfalls can often be averted if parents and coaches understand how kids develop their athletic abilities. “Children build sports skills in a progressive sequence that we can’t dramatically speed up,” says Dr. Paul Stricker, a Scripps Clinic sports medicine pediatrician, Olympic physician and author of “Sports Success Rx!”

“When we understand how a child’s sports skills develop, and then allow those skills to progress with patience and support, we provide the best opportunity to maximize performance and minimize pressure,” Dr. Stricker says.

Dr. Stricker says in the past decade he’s seen a 25-percent jump in the number of overuse injuries he treats – and the injuries themselves are becoming more severe. “Stress fractures were unheard of in children just a few years ago, but now have become relatively common,” he says. “That’s what we get when we train kids at adult levels.”

To help kids effectively learn sports skills, Dr. Stricker says parents and coaches need to understand all three core developmental processes – physical, intellectual and emotional. To start, Dr. Stricker offers a sampling of physical sports skill milestones that are important to keep in mind:

- **Ages 2 to 5:** Most kids can’t yet effectively throw and catch (due to incomplete development of the brain’s vision centers); basic skills like running and hopping are acquired mostly through unstructured play
- **Ages 6 to 9:** The body’s nerve connections start doing a better job of communicating the brain’s messages to the muscles – as a result, a basic toss may progress to a more accurate throw
- **Preadolescence (age 10 to puberty):** Control of body motions becomes more automatic; kids can refine skills like pivoting, turning and spinning; eye-to-brain pathways mature, allowing for better visual judgment of speed and location

- **Puberty (usually ages 11-13 for girls; 13-15 for boys):** Due to rapid physical growth, there may be a temporary decline in balance skills and body control, as the body's center of gravity changes
- **Mid to late teens:** More aerobic gains are achievable with training; strength gains can be achieved, but heavy weights should be avoided until the skeleton fully matures

Visit scripps.org/padres for more sports medicine news.

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SIDEBAR:

The 4 Ps of Youth Sports

- **Participation** – All kids need to exercise their brains and bodies
- **Practicality** – Don't define success strictly by wins; recognize personal growth
- **Protection** – Kids need time to develop; resist the urge to train too hard, too soon
- **Performance** – Competition can be healthy if approached with knowledge, patience & support

Source: "Sports Success Rx!" by Dr. Paul Stricker, Scripps Clinic